00:08

Hello everyone and welcome to another episode  of our higher education podcast series as part

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of the work we do at Diversity and Ability. As  you can see from everyone's background all of my

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guests today are from Diversity and Ability  which is the disabled led social enterprise

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you can find out more about us on our website  which we'll put a link to in the description.

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Today we'll be focusing on assistive technology  and asking ourselves the question of what are the

00:36

barriers to assistive technology what is it and is  it time that we rename assistive technology. Today

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we have Meghan , Charlie and Brian. Meghan  would you kindly introduce yourself please

00:50

Hi I'm Meghan I'm the training and innovations  lead at diversity and ability as Piers has already

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said my role is really about doing everything  everything we can possible to make organizations

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universities and different people that we work  with as inclusive and accessible as possible

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and to really get them excited about diversity and  celebrating difference so what that looks like is

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I tend to spend most of my time making resources  or videos and trialling new different technologies

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new assistive technologies and delivering training  sessions. Next up we will have Brian my name is

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Brian Lutchmiah I'm uh I work for D&A I'm the HE  partnerships and inclusion lead and work with this

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wonderful team who are being introduced today I'm  also currently chair of the national association

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of disability practitioners which focuses on  supporting specialist practitioners working

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in student services and particularly delivering  services to disabled students and I'm also chair

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of the link european network which is working  with six partner countries alongside the uk

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to focus on universal design for learning  now all of those roles do encompass um

02:03

aspects of assistive software and assistive  technology it's an important part of everything

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that that happens in the sector and most  importantly for disabled students in terms

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of engaging directly with their course of study  I'm got about 20 years of experience working in

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education and that's probably the reason why I'm  got very little hair back to you piers last but

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very much not least we have Charlie and  Charlie go ahead and introduce yourself please

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thank you Piers, yeah so a bit less experience  than Brian I suppose I've just kind of started in

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the education realm but in D&A I manage our higher  education partnerships with universities trying to

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basically instil some of the sort of values that  Meghan mentioned when she did her introduction

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but primarily in this talk today I'll be looking  at one of the provisions on the projects we

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ran with Imperial College London and sort of the  takeaways that we gained from that. Brilliant

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thank you so much so we'll just jump  straight to our first question and

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the first question is to you Meghan as someone  who has been a part of creating and delivering

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so many great resources on assistive technology  what in your experience is assistive technology

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and how valuable is it for for everyone I think  that's a really great question and one that might

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take me the whole length of the video to answer  so I will try and be as concise as possible

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and essentially what is assistive technology  this could be answered in a couple of ways

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and if I was thinking about where I was when  I was at university before I really understood

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what assistive technology could be and got the  knowledge that I've got now I would have told

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you assistive technology is specific tools that  are for disabled people that can mean that we

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can access different things that might be a video  meeting or mean that we can access our computers

04:01

but now with my much more kind of developed  I suppose understanding of what assistive

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technology actually is I would probably just  read you a list of apps that are on my phone

04:12

so assistive technology really is any product or  any equipment or software or tool that supports

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people to participate that removes barriers and  ultimately assists or enables someone to do what

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they need to do and that could be as simple  as me saying ah I really fancy going to my

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local coffee shop but I'm not sure where the- how  actually I should get there so what I would do is

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I would open my phone I'd click on google maps  or any other map software and I would then type

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in the name of the coffee shop and that there has  enabled me or assisted me to do what I need to do

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so now when I think about assistive technology  it's really any app or any tool or any piece of

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equipment that will get me to a space where I can  do what I need to be able to do and hopefully do

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it relatively well so why is assistive technology  so valuable I guess was the other part of that

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question well it's valuable because for me  it meant that I could actually sit in this

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meeting that I can understand what's being said  I'm using assistive technology at the moment

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I'm using the captioning feature I'm  using a screen reader on one side of

05:16

my screen and my whole screen is tinted so  I can read different elements of the text

05:21

um but it also is valuable from the perspective  of just being able to interact on a daily basis

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if you have ever seen one of my unedited emails  or texts you will see that my spelling is really

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not quite brilliant and that means you probably  wouldn't be able to understand what I meant if I

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was just to text you but what assistive technology  means is that actually when I do send you a text

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or an email hopefully and maybe Piers you can  attest to this that it might be at least a little

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bit more understandable because I'm used a tool  like grammarly or like a built-in text-to-speech

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or speech correction tool that means that  actually you can understand what I'm saying

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so for me it's just about being able to  do what I need to do on a daily basis.

06:03

Thank you so much and it is so valuable and it  took me a couple of years into university to

06:09

realize how valuable it was um and take up um the  the technology that I'm been provided with and use

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the free stuff that I could find on the app store  google maps now has a wheelchair function on it so

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that you can just click it and it'll show you step  free routes which was so helpful when I lived in

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North Wales where there's hills and steps just in  the middle of nowhere for no apparent reason on to

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our next question which will be over to you Brian  we've talked about how valuable it is and what

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assistive technology is but as someone with such  an extensive history with disability professional

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background what do you think some of the  barriers are for is this a technology take-up um

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and what do you think we can do potentially to to  address them yes a very it's a very good question

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technology is part and parcel of everyday modern  life now I think we can we can all attest to

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that and particularly in the past year with the  recent pandemic I think there's been much more of

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a reliance and understanding and knowledge around  the use of technology and in particular assistive

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technology with the added component of students  being taught in remote environments rather than

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face to face in a campus environment and that  has altered the teaching and learning experience

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from a student perspective for transposing that  into kind of the disabled student journey in terms

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of engaging with study and my background one of  the things I didn't mention earlier is that I had

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a background in managing student services for a  university so I'm got some detailed knowledge of

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the experience directly of professionals and  also of the experiences of disabled students

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we know that nationally there is a low take-up  in assistive software and technology training

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as part of the disabled students allowance  now there could be a variety of factors that

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are associated with that some of the the responses  when I've had conversations directly with students

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have included things such as I know how to use  my computer I know how to use the software I

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don't think I need that I haven't used anything or  needed anything like that before why would I need

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that now. Now there's a reflection on  perhaps how that is handled in an assessment

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um conversation and also getting students  to really think about the forthcoming three

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years of their study and the varying degrees of  development that they will have and will need as

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part of that academic growth there's also a focus  on the training aspect which is much more about

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the quality of the delivery the quality of the  information that disabled students have access to

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the quality of support that they have in getting  used to the software that they've been issued

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in such a way that they can integrate it quite  normally into their everyday academic routine

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and I think that's really important where using  using bits of software using the technology in a

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way that actually provides a level playing field  for students to engage with their study is is and

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tends to be the net result when used successfully  another factor that we recognize in in and across

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the sector that is requiring focus is around the  use of terminology and some of the terminologies

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and languages that are used when talking about  disability or inclusivity may be slightly

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different they'll mean the same thing but they  might have a slightly different aspect to them

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so there's this whole core line in between which  is about actually what works best for the student

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and what will work best for the student is  standardizing an approach every student and every

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department in the university all use technology  under different names um and other different job

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titles and the different application processes  even if you apply for dsa it can all be a bit

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confusing particularly with that terminology  aspect and from my own experience that is very

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true um often assistive technology would sit  under i.t the information technology department

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but the information technology department are more  about fixing your computer and fixing the software

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rather than helping you use that software  to access learning material and then on the

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complete opposite side the lecturers would be like  well you've got access to the software so it's

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all good right? Not realizing that the content  has to be accessible and the training has to be

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embedded in that pedagogy. Part of your background  Charlie has been addressing that sort of issue of

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you know assistive technology training or you know  study tools training and all of these things that

11:04

Meghan's mentioned in the resources and guides  she's created shouldn't really sit under i.t

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or in a weird part of library services so my  question to you is you know you've recently

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presented to the head conference highlighting a  particular case study uh imperial college london I

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believe are you able to give us a brief intro and  insight into that and what the main takeaways of

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that you know real life case study was yeah yeah  happily uh what it does quite nice is it gives

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context to the aspect that Brian was talking about  there and how that kind of ethos can be practiced

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in the real world um so yeah a bit of background  I suppose I think one of the first things people

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think about when they have this idea of assistive  technology at university is how do I access it

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and what is the cost involved in that now  luckily in them in the uk we have the disabled

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students allowance that Brian's alluded to  so if you go to the dsa process um and you

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have a diagnosis you can access funds which  gives you access to assistive technologies so

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that's all well and good but the question is here  what if I don't have a diagnosis or if I can't

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access the dsa for that reason or because I'm an  international student and Imperial College if you

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look at their statistics on international students  is quite high I can't remember the exact number

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but it's one of the highest I think in the uk um  so because of that you've got a whole proportion

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of their student population that can't access the  DSA but still might need the assistive technology

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element that comes from it as Meghan alluded to  in her uh answer so what imperial did is they

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said well we want to make sure we have the  funds to sort of back us up we want to make

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sure that any student at the college  can access the technology, study tools,

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when they need it they don't have to go  through long processes they don't have to

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fill out various forms they could just have it  instantly in either their own laptop computer or

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out on site in the labs and in the library. The  big question is though what assistive technology

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will be most beneficial to Imperial students  you know each university has their own kind of

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specialism and at Imperial especially it's the  stem subjects which sort of saying okay which

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programs which softwares will really benefit  our students the way they study which is where

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we came in so we looked at their courses with  how they teach those courses and recommended

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them a package of assistive technology that  they could provide to all their students again

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all great a university with resources to do this  and the capacity to do this but then the problem

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I suppose becomes- and this stemmed from their  marketing team actually sort of approaching us

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and saying- well it's called assistive technology  in the sector but will students know what that is

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will they really get an idea of how beneficial it  can be to them or will they just associate it with

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a disability that some might say they don't have  they sort of gave you sent this problem our way

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and we sort of- they sent this problem our way and  we said well okay that's there's a lot to unpick

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there but let's just see for this project what  happens if we kind of rename it and change the

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approach a little bit so for the project we called  it inclusive technology just we left it like that

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and we're now on the third year of the project in  that project not only yeah we recommended packages

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but we provided training on them through this  inclusive technology study skills for all approach

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and one of the statistics that we pulled from  this and we found quite interesting was that

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for the project many people accessing assistive  technology would have been disabled students

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whereas now we saw in the college that it was  sort of 66 percent of non-disabled students

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were accessing software kind of suggesting to  me that that narrative around who can access it

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was broken down to some degree and we would hope  that to say that it's become more of a campus-wide

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initiative so two aspects there that we sort of  hope we broke down one is this physical access

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to it through resources that can be funnelled in  the right way then also how you kind of market

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it and sell it to students who may not have heard  of assistive technology before and associate it

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with how it can benefit them and their course  so again we didn't go out in the project

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to I suppose measure this to measure how changing  language and what we call it impacts on take-up

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but it was quite a nice kind of third year result  that we found coming from it which I suppose has

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lead to this kind of discussion we're having  now is how can that be reflected sector-wide

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in terms of terminology being uniform thank you  um I think that that stat in particular about you

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know beforehand it was 100 of disclosed disabled  students we know uh I know personally and I'm sure

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quite a few people here today have had that do I  disclose don't I disclose uh issue particularly if

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you're an international student and you have  to look at the visa restrictions to do with

16:01

uh disability and medical exemptions it's do I  disclose don't I disclose and just renaming it and

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knowing that your audience might have that barrier  to inclusive technology or study tools for all

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and seeing you know two-thirds of the respondents  and take-up being non-disclosed or non-disabled

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students is such a poignant I think a poignant  statistic um for that third year particularly when

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you didn't go out of your way to to to be studying  this it was just a by-product of trying to make an

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inclusive service it is just one of those ones  which is about to a certain extent addressing

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differences in terminology but also supporting  people so they don't have to disclose and don't

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have to publicly declare or out themselves as it  sometimes feels like so thank you so much for all

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three of your answers um I'm got a little bit of a  follow-up question for you all and we're not here

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today to answer the question should we rename  it we want to leave that up to you the audience

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but I always like to leave everyone that's  listening with something they can do tomorrow so

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they can you know finish listening it can just  fix if you could give a one bit of advice to do

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with assistive technology whether it was renaming  standardizing reiterating something you mentioned

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that you think is really important what would  it be and why do you think that's important

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go with you charlie good question my key  takeaway would be any new type of software

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software any new platform that you use can be very  intimidating when you start using it and there are

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lots of tutorials and resources online at the  moment but often if you are a student or even

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if you are just uh working in a company don't be  afraid to sort of ask for help and say I'm really

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struggling with this software I have a lot of  questions about the software can you help do

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you know who can help me because having that kind  of one-to-one time with someone who really knows

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how to use the software um is it's so beneficial  you can save yourself hours going through the

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internet trying to read various guides um you can  crunch that down into just a five minute chat with

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someone who can point you in the right direction  so that'll be my main takeaway- try and ask for

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any kind of help don't power through  and think you know what to do- you'll

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waste your time! brilliant thank  you um right so I've written down

18:25

two words these two words I think  are extremely important not only to

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universities and professional services delivering  um support but also wider sector the two words

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also have a great deal of meaning in particular  for each and every student the first word is

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retention the second word is achievement now when  we talk about inclusion we should be talking about

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inclusion as a whole aspect so it's inclusive  of every single student every member of staff

19:01

that delivers the pedagogy in such a way that it  enables students to reach their desired outcome

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and so those two words I think are very important  to health check in terms of why am I here why am

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I being asked to take up my AT um training why  do I need that actually the answer to that is

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it aids both ongoing retention and also aids that  direct link into achieving the outcome you have

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arrived at university for ask you Meghan the final  question so for you what would you think is you

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know that take home message and you know why I'm  had some great answers from Charlie and Brian so I

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feel like there's not much left for me to say but  I'm going to give you an action to go and try and

19:52

do head over to the Diversity and Ability website  have a look on the resources page and choose a

19:57

piece of assistive technology from there that  you've not yet seen or heard much about before,

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download it most of them are free many of them  are open source or have free trials if they aren't

20:07

free download it try it out and let us know what  you think so true and valuable um and all you have

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to do as well is we've got that little cool  filter function as well so you can just tick

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free and assistive technology and you'll get all  of the free assistive technology stuff so if you

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don't want to pay anything as well if you they're  all nice and easy to search to everyone listening

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and to my guests in particular I just want to  say a massive thank you uh all of the resources

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on our page are written and curated and delivered  um by those of us at Diversity and Ability and

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some guests as well that we usually have  centring our lived experiences and centring

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our understanding of how disability impacts us  uh how we express ourselves in society and how

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we access society so I can only reiterate  what Meghan's point was to take away

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and as well as the amazing things that Charlie  and Brian have covered today so just before

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we finish I'll leave you with the question is  it time to rename assistive technology thanks